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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/27/2018
TAGS: [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: MIN. OF INTERIOR PRAISES INTEL EXCHANGE IN REP.
HOEKSTRA MEETING

REF: TUNIS 282 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (S/NF) During the March 25-27 visit of CODEL Boehner, Rep. Peter Hoekstra (R-MI) met with Minister of Interior Rafik Belhaj Kacem to discuss the regional terrorist threat and bilateral intelligence cooperation. Belhaj Kacem said US-Tunisian cooperation includes joint operations and sharing "all you ask of us" on terrorism issues. Tunisia had made an irreversible choice to combat terrorism - which is our shared enemy. Belhaj Kacem said the best way to confront this enemy is through a quick exchange of information and that the Ministry of Interior (MOI) is ready to share any information the USG needs, including intelligence on foreign targets. The Ambassador stressed the importance of information exchange and that we look forward to improving this aspect of the relationship. "Our cooperation is unreserved," concluded the Minister. Hoekstra voiced appreciation for the Ministry's recent assistance on a particular case (reported through other channels).

12. (S/NF) Hoekstra, the ranking member of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, asked the Minister how the US can support Tunisian counterterrorism efforts. Belhaj Kacem said the MOI needs technical cooperation that will allow Tunisian services to obtain needed intelligence. He also noted the need for logistical support for Tunisian intervention efforts, but stressed there is ongoing USG cooperation in this area. The Ambassador added that the USG was prepared to offer any needed assistance related to the recent kidnapping of two Austrian tourists (reftels); Belhaj Kacem said he appreciates any information that can be shared.

13. (S/NF) Comment: Despite Belhaj Kacem's positive statements, MOI cooperation has been difficult. This meeting is part of our continuing efforts to improve bilateral cooperation. Only time will tell if Belhaj Kacem's words will result in action. End Comment.

14. (S/NF) Participants: Belhaj Kacem was accompanied by the Director General for International Cooperation Tahar Fellous and an interpreter. The Ambassador accompanied Rep. Hoekstra, along with GRPO, Congressional Staffer Jim Lewis and an embassy interpreter.

15. (S/NF) Bio Note: Belhaj Kacem, who in past USG meetings has been surly and occasionally hostile, was remarkably open and pleasant during the meeting. He also demonstrated remarkable flexibility, suggesting several different meeting times until one that worked with the CODEL's schedule was identified. Ultimately, the meeting was held at 7:30 p.m., a time that Belhaj Kacem said "did not conform with diplomatic

protocol." Despite the imposition, the Minister was the friendliest we have seen in recent memory. It is unclear if he was putting on his best face for the Congressman, or if Ben Ali's voiced commitment to improving CT cooperation has finally had an impact on Belhaj Kacem.

16. (U) Rep. Hoekstra has not cleared this cable.

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<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/nea/tunis/index.cfm>
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